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Lake County's much-ballyhooed traffic management center will do more than ease the region's notorious gridlock, proponents said Tuesday during a groundbreaking ceremony for the facility.

The computerized system also is expected to boost the local economy, improve the environment and even help police officers catch crooks.

Those predictions aren't as far-fetched as they may seem.

The \$1.3 million center, which will be built at the county's transportation headquarters in Libertyville, will use cameras, electronic sensors and other equipment to determine whether traffic is moving smoothly and adjust traffic lights accordingly.

And if cars are moving smoothly, officials say, people may be more willing to drive to stores here for shopping excursions, thereby helping the economy.

Likewise, if it takes you less time to drive to a destination, your car will have less time to belch pollutants into the air.

As for the law enforcement benefits, imagine police are trying to catch a bank robber fleeing a heist in a car. The staff at the transportation center can track the suspect's getaway on the system's cameras and relay the information to the pursuing officers.

"It's almost like a virtual (police) helicopter," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a Republican from Highland Park who helped secure federal funding for the project.

Kirk, U.S. Rep. Phil Crane of Wauconda and county board Chairwoman Suzi Schmidt were among the local notables who donned hardhats and dipped ceremonial shovels into the dirt at

the construction site Tuesday.

The 4,700-square-foot center will be built just south of the transportation headquarters' main entrance on Winchester Road. Real construction work is set to begin July 12 and should conclude in April.

The center will be the hub of the county's long-planned intelligent transportation system. In addition to controlling traffic signals, such systems relay congestion-related information to motorists via roadside signs, the radio and other media.

"When there's a problem on our roads, the center will provide more effective management," said county board member Diana O'Kelly, a Mundelein-area Republican who heads the public works and transportation committee.

The system could cost \$5.8 million and take a decade to fully implement. Officials said they hope to begin testing the center next summer.

The politicians who spoke Tuesday are also counting on the center to fulfill its primary goal: relieving traffic congestion on local roads.

"As more and more people live and work in Lake County, it's more and more important to do what we can about our transportation problem," said Schmidt, a Lake Villa Township Republican.